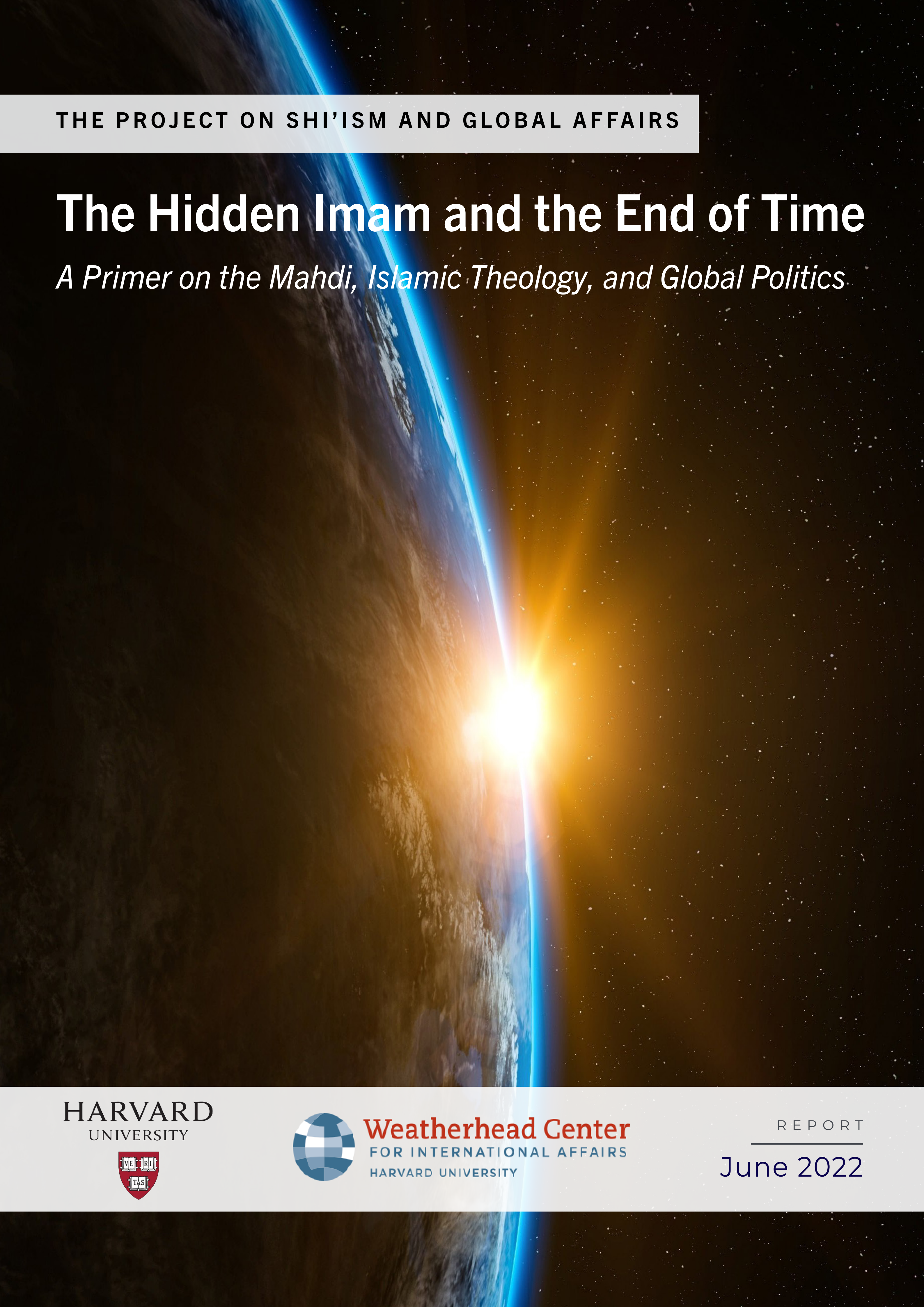


THE PROJECT ON SHI'ISM AND GLOBAL AFFAIRS

The Hidden Imam and the End of Time

A Primer on the Mahdi, Islamic Theology, and Global Politics

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Weatherhead Center
FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

REPORT

June 2022

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Harvard University has dedicated itself to strengthening the spirit of inclusion and belonging and fostering an environment open to diversity and pluralism, whether in intellectual thought or social life among the student, staff, and faculty bodies. Our work over the past three years at Harvard's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs (WCFIA) has sought to affirm this commitment and contribute to enriching discussions and research on the neglected subject of diversity and pluralism within the Islamic tradition. This includes studying the worldview and conceptualization of the religion itself within a pluralistic framework that incorporates diverse Islamic theologies, thought traditions, and what it means to be Muslim.

Our contributions, especially to research, teaching, and public education of Shi'a Islam, and the internal diversity of the Islamic tradition, have aimed to further the rich and multifaceted approaches to the study of Islam and transnational Muslim communities across the globe. This is all the more important in enriching perspectives on world religions and global cultural diversity given the thesis on the "clash of civilizations," which posited larger global civilizational sources driving international conflict and tensions, developed by the late Professor Samuel Huntington, a former director at the (Weatherhead) Center for International Affairs and Harvard faculty member. We hope that our contribution to Shi'a thought and identity in transnational and cross-cultural spaces has assisted in widening intellectual horizons, highlighting pluralistic approaches to these complex global issues, and providing inclusive space for Harvard students, staff, and faculty to focus on these subject areas.

We would like to particular express our gratitude to the Henry Luce Foundation for all of their support for our work throughout the past three years to advancing the knowledge of Shi'a Islam and its role in global affairs. We would also like to thank our Faculty Chair, Professor Ali Asani, for his support and guidance on approaching the subject of pluralism within Islam, a topic he has passionately supported throughout his academic career at Harvard University. We also thank the student researchers who assisted with the production of this report.

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Located on the outskirts of Qom, Iran, the Jamkaran Mosque is a popular pilgrimage site for Shi'a Muslims. Twelver Shi'as bestow the mosque with significance tied to the Twelfth Imam, the awaited Mahdi and end-times Savior who is prophesized to return with the Prophet Jesus to establish justice on earth.

2022. Credit: [Islamoriente (CC0 BY-SA-1.0)]

Introduction

In early May of 2022, President Joe Biden revived the U.S. presidential tradition of hosting an Eid al-Fitr celebration at the White House to mark the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.[1] This important decision marked the fulfillment of an electoral campaign promise made by Biden to reinstate the annual White House event—in place since the Clinton administration but discontinued by former President Donald Trump during his tenure. Standing in the East Room, Biden stated his desire to learn more about Islam and expressed his realization of how little he knew of the diversity of beliefs within the religion, specifically providing the example of the "Hidden Imam."[2] But who is the Hidden Imam? What is the Imamate? And why are these concepts important for understanding contemporary Muslim societies and communities, including here in the United States?

For hundreds of millions of Muslims around the world, including in the West, the Hidden Imam is at the heart of Islam. While those with some background in the study of the faith may have heard of this belief, its core centrality in the Islamic tradition is generally not recognized or properly understood. To address some of these questions, the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs at Harvard University's Weatherhead Center has compiled the present report, entitled *The Hidden Imam and the End of Time: A Primer on the Mahdi, Islamic Theology, and Leadership*, to raise awareness on the concept, meaning, and significance of the Hidden Imam for scholars, policymakers, and broader public audiences alike. This is in line with our larger efforts at the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs where we call for greater study and public education of the pluralism and diversity of thought within the Islamic tradition, particularly advancing knowledge and public awareness of the Shi'a Islamic tradition—the second largest denomination of Islam in the world with an estimated 220-250 million adherents worldwide.

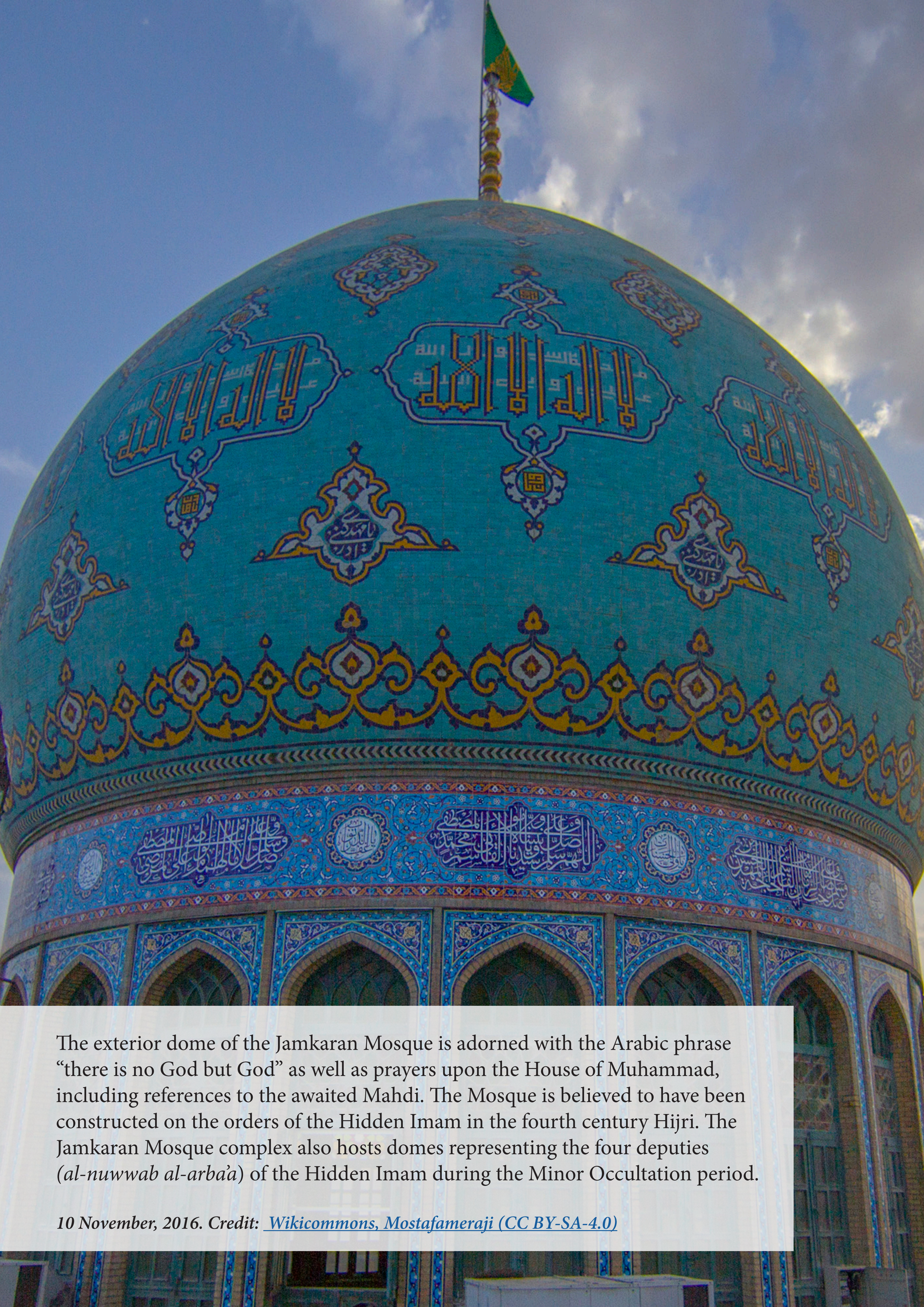
In particular, this primer answers five pertinent questions of significance on this subject relevant to religion and global affairs: 1) Who is the Hidden Imam?; 2) Do Sunni Muslims also believe in the Hidden Imam?; 3) How is the Imam different from the Caliphate?; 4) Why is the Hidden Imam considered central to Islam by many Muslims?; and 5) How does the belief in the Hidden Imam impact Muslim social and political affairs?

[1] Will Weissert, "Biden restores celebration of Eid al-Fitr at White House," *AP News*, 05 May 2022.
[2] Joe Biden, "Remarks by President Biden at a Reception to Celebrate Eid al-Fitr," *The White House*, 02 May 2022.

These questions are particularly salient given the historical marginalization of the study of Shi'a Islam in academia and the problematic relegation of Shi'a Islam as an "unorthodox" or "heretical" form of Islam. This is despite the fact that Shi'a Islam—contrary to the historical and sociological dimensions of the Catholic-Protestant split in Christianity—was in existence in some form from the very origins of Islam and has remained so until the present day. Biased or incorrect understandings of Shi'ism only perpetuate certain polemical descriptions of the Shi'a faith that reify particular historically privileged Sunni interpretations of the religion that are then mistakenly treated as "orthodox" in Orientalist scholarship—which, simultaneously, also problematically ignores the internally pluralistic readings of Sunni Islam itself. Often times, presentations of Shi'a Islam are limited to a discussion of the political succession dispute following Prophet Muhammad rather than taking seriously the tradition's theological, civilizational, and philosophical worldview about the very meaning of Islam itself. Understanding these dynamics are also important for appreciating the role of Islam in America, where Shi'a Muslims constitute a significant portion of the thriving American-Muslim community and contribute substantially to American civic and public life.

Shi'a Islam is a vast category with diverse denominations including Twelver Ja'fari, Nizari Ismaili, Musta'li Ismaili, Bektashi, Alawite, Ismaili Druze, Zaydi, and Alevi branches, among others. Large Twelver Shi'a Muslim communities can be found in places such as Iran, Turkey, India, Pakistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Syria, Nigeria, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf. Ismaili Shi'a Muslims can be predominantly found in South Asia and Central Asia including in Tajikistan, Pakistan, and India, with notable communities also in the Arabian Peninsula, while Zaydi Shi'a Muslims are predominantly found in Yemen and Saudi Arabia today, and Druze communities are predominant in the Levant. These diverse Shi'a Muslim denominations also have flourishing Western diaspora communities and, for the Ismailis and Twelvers in particular, historic diasporic communities across the African continent. The idea of Hidden Imams and hidden leaders has been widespread across almost all of these branches. There have been, however, disagreements regarding the individuals in concealment and the time periods in which an individual has been, or currently is, in concealment.

While a proper treatment of the concept of the Hidden Imam and its rich and multifaceted dimensions in Islamic thought would require much more space than afforded in this report, we provide summary answers and key insights accessible for broader audiences for what is in reality a complex issue that spans centuries of Islamic history and thought. The answers to some of these questions are further broken down into short and long-answer forms for those interested in further details.



The exterior dome of the Jamkaran Mosque is adorned with the Arabic phrase “there is no God but God” as well as prayers upon the House of Muhammad, including references to the awaited Mahdi. The Mosque is believed to have been constructed on the orders of the Hidden Imam in the fourth century Hijri. The Jamkaran Mosque complex also hosts domes representing the four deputies *(al-nuwwab al-arba'a)* of the Hidden Imam during the Minor Occultation period.

10 November, 2016. Credit: [***Wikicommons, Mostafameraji (CC BY-SA-4.0)***]

Question 1 |

Who is the Hidden Imam?

Short Answer:

The Hidden Imam refers to the Guardian of the Age (*Vali-ye Asr*) as well as the end-times Savior for many Muslims, especially among most Shi'a Muslim denominations. Also referred to as the promised Mahdi, he is a member of the House of Muhammad (i.e. the Holy Family of the Prophet Muhammad, referred to as the *Ahl al-Bayt*). He is believed to be currently alive and active, but his identity is concealed. A major reason for his concealment is understood through humanity's fall, represented by people's negligence of God's guidance, ignorance, and false worldly attachments (e.g. wealth, power, fame, pride, etc.). According to these beliefs, the Hidden Imam will emerge at the End of Time with the Messiah, Jesus Christ, as his partisan, to lead humanity, and he will bring justice on earth just as it had been filled with injustice, ignorance, and tyranny before his advent. His believers pray for his emergence, strive to live in his path, and request his intercession for success and salvation. The belief in the Hidden Imam is not only significant doctrinally among Muslims, but it also has had practical consequences including in social, cultural, political, military, and economic arenas throughout Muslim societies across time.

For Twelver Shi'a Muslims, the most numerous category within the Shi'a tradition, the Hidden Imam is believed to be the person of the Twelfth Imam, a direct descendent of Prophet Muhammad through his grandson, Hussain, as the Prophets' twelfth and final divinely appointed successor. The idea of the concealment, hiddenness, or occultation of a long-living savior, moreover, is not unique to Shi'a Islam. It represents a common and widespread belief across Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist traditions, among others.

Extended Answer:

The Imams in the Shi'a tradition are the legitimate successors to the Prophet Muhammad and who, according to almost all Shi'a denominations, inherit all functions and aspects of divine Prophets save for scriptural revelation and the unattainable status of the Prophet Muhammad. The Imams, therefore, have divine political-spiritual authority on behalf of God as successors to the Prophet. A

significant doctrine and belief across several Islamic traditions–including among Musta'li Ismaili, Druze, Twelver Ja'fari, Alevi, Alawite, and Bektashi, among others, the Hidden Imam is considered the last of a series of Imams who is currently living in concealment but who will openly emerge at the End of Time. The Hidden Imam (*al-Imam al-Gha'ib or al-Imam al-Mastur*) is further considered the Savior—often referred to as the "Mahdi" (i.e. "rightly guided one" in Arabic)—who will establish justice on earth as it had been filled with injustice (see Table 1 below for definitions of key concepts related to the Hidden Imam).

These narrations and beliefs about the Hidden Imam are highly eschatological, or end-times oriented in nature, and, in fact, many Islamic narrations hold that the Savior will return together with the Messiah, Prophet Jesus, son of the Virgin Mary, to usher in a new stage of human civilization and bring forth many new sciences. The last Imam is considered to be a hidden leader because, while alive and living with the people, he is concealed, or in "occultation" like the sun behind the clouds, and not openly known and publicly accessible by all. Importantly, moreover, the theme of end-times is heavily emphasized in the Qur'an with a large portion of the scripture focused on eschatology. Therefore, like the other monotheistic traditions, Islam is also deeply focused on the end-times.

The belief in the end-times Mahdi is almost universally accepted across all Sunni and Shi'a Muslim denominations. There are, however, differences between Muslim traditions and scholars about who the specific person of the Mahdi is and whether he has already been born and thus alive yet "hidden" from public view. There is consensus among all Twelver Shi'a Islamic denominations, which represent the largest demography of Shi'a Muslims, that the Hidden Imam and Mahdi is the person of the Twelfth Imam, often referred to as Hujjat ibn al-Hasan. He is a descendent of the line of Imam Hussain, the third Imam and grandson of the Prophet who, alongside most of his family members and close companions, was unjustly and viciously killed and martyred by the Umayyad Caliph Yazid ibn Mu'awiya in Karbala in the year 680 CE in present-day Iraq. Today, Imam Hussain's shrine in Karbala is witness to the largest global religious pilgrimage during the annual commemoration of Arbaeen, seeing anywhere from 15 to over 30 million pilgrims, which itself has important eschatological significance. Ismaili Druze, on the other hand, believe the current long-living Hidden Imam to be the Fatimid Caliph-Imam al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah who went into occultation in the early eleventh century, while Musta'li Ismailis (also referred to as Tayyibi Ismailis) believe al-Tayyib Abu-l Qasim entered into occultation in the twelfth century, and a line of Hidden Imams continues until today.

For Twelver Shi'as, however, the Twelfth Imam and Mahdi, went into major occultation in 941 CE and is believed to be alive yet concealed since then. Millions of

Muslims pray daily for his emergence as a savior and guide for all of humanity—not just for the Muslim world—as the doctrine of the Imamate rests at the heart of their beliefs and lived practices and the believers pray for his return as a realization of justice and equity in the world. It is largely believed that the reason for his apparent absence, despite his continued real presence, is because people have lost themselves and forgotten who they are. This condition signifies the fall of mankind as people have become engrossed in sin, attached to false worldly desires and passions (e.g. wealth, power, fame, pride, etc.), and negligent of the message and meaning of Islam, the Prophet, and the Qur'an.

The world, therefore, is believed to be filled with injustice and ignorance as a result of oppressive human actions, and there are no other means or solutions to comprehensively solving global problems but the emergence of the Savior who will put world affairs in order and establish justice on earth as humanity has never experienced. The future-oriented vision of the Mahdi that is embedded in Shi'a Islam, therefore, looks to the future, rather than a golden age in the past, to realize and implement the message of Prophet Muhammad. History, including Islamic history, and our current age, from this perspective, while containing some bright points at times, is generally characterized by injustice, corruption, and ignorance wherein human societies have not reached their true potential.

Importantly, moreover, the belief in the concept of "occultation" or "concealment" is not a particular Muslim or Shi'a doctrine. The ideas of occultation, hidden figures, and end-times redemption are quite widespread among different world traditions. It has existed in pre-Islamic traditions, whether in Jewish and Christian traditions or in other Near Eastern religions, such as Zoroastrianism. The religion of Zoroastrianism has significantly shaped much of the belief systems of the Abrahamic faiths, such as the belief in one God, the existence of heaven and hell, the belief in free will, sin, the Day of Judgment, resurrection of the dead, and the end-times Savior, including the occultation of important eschatological figures. Mainstream Christian beliefs center on the heavenly occultation of Jesus Christ; the idea of an immortal figure in occultation to appear in the end-times, the Pishyotan, can be found in Zoroastrian beliefs; and within Buddhist beliefs is the promised eschatological figure, the Maitreya Buddha, who also currently resides in heavenly occultation. In Judaic apocalyptic traditions as well, the "Son of Man," the end-times Savior, is also believed to be in occultation as he "was chosen and hidden with God before the world was created, and will remain in His presence forevermore,"[3] in parallel beliefs with Islamic and Shi'a thought. Additionally, many Jews believe in the occultation and long-life of

[3] See Joseph Jacobs and Moses Buttenwieser, "Messiah," in *Jewish Encyclopedia.*

Prophet Elijah who will return as a harbinger of the promised Messiah.[4]

Most Muslim traditions—whether Shi'a or Sunni—also believe that Prophet Jesus is currently alive and in occultation until the end-times to return as the Messiah. They additionally believe in the long-life and current occultation of Prophets Elijah (or Elias), Idris, and Khidr (or Khizr). While the idea of occultation and eschatological redemption may seem alien to modern ears – especially given its centrality and emphasis in modern Shi'a Islam – it is in fact a widespread concept that stretches across global civilizations and belief systems.

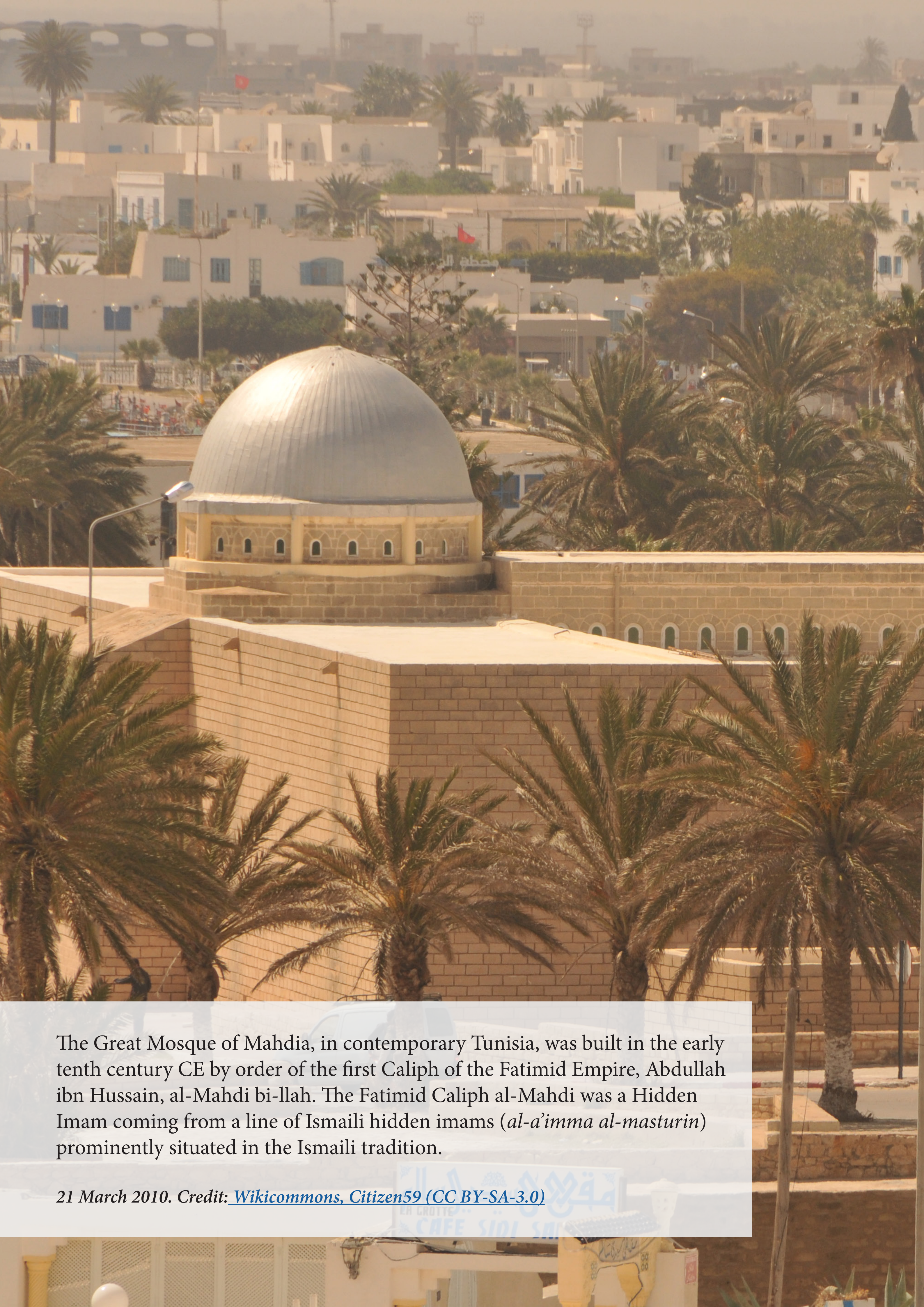
[4] Daniel C. Matt, *Becoming Elijah: Prophet of Transformation,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 75ff.

Table 1. Key Terms Related to Concept of the Hidden Imam

Term	Definition
Imam	Imams in the Shi'a tradition are the legitimate successors to the Prophet Muhammad and who, according to most Shi'a denominations, inherit all functions and aspects of prophets save for scriptural revelation and the unattainable position of the Prophet Muhammad who is considered to be the best of God's creation and the most perfect human being.
Occultation (*ghayba or istitar*)	To be present yet hidden; concealed – similar to the "sun behind the clouds." A doctrine found in Islam to describe figures such the Twelfth Imam or the Prophet Jesus. The term occultation (*ghayba* or *istitar*) has also been applied to some prophets, such as Jesus, or the Hidden Imam who have extended lives but are not publicly accessible.
Hidden Imam *(al-Imam al-Gha'ib or al-Imam al-Mastur)*	For Twelver Ja'fari Shi'a Muslims, the Hidden Imam is the Twelfth Imam who entered into Minor Occultation in the year 874 CE, where he kept communication with the community via four consecutive formal representatives. He then entered Major Occultation in 941 CE when formal direct public contact with him via intermediaries was discontinued. He is alive and remains concealed until today. Other denominations of Islam also believe in current Hidden Imams alive and in occultation, such as Musta'li Ismailis and Ismaili Druze whose Hidden Imams went into occultation in the twelfth century and eleventh centuries respectively, or the Nizari Ismailis who believe in lineages of Hidden Imams in previous eras.
Mahdi	The salvific end-times redeemer; the "rightly guided one" promised by the Prophet Muhammad to "fill the earth with justice just as it had been filled with injustice" at the end of time. The title is often interchangeable with the term Qa'im (the Immortal Avenger) and Sahib al-Zaman (the Guardian of Time) which have specific doctrinal and eschatological significance within Islam.
al-Hujja	The term al-Hujja translates to "Proof" in Arabic. It is used in Shi'a theological treatises to refer to the Imam as a Proof of God on earth and a sign of his divinely sent leadership to guide humanity in the best form possible.

Term	Definition
al-Qa'im	The title of one who arises or leads revolution; the title is used interchangeably with Mahdi. The term Qa'im is also usually associated with the notion of immortality, hence a translation of the term could also be that of the "Immortal Avenger" who is alive and will set aright the wrongs in the world, especially avenging the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, which took place in Karbala, Iraq in the year 660 CE.
Sahib al-Zaman, Imam al-Zaman, Imam al-Asr, Vali al-Asr	These titles are often used to refer to the Hidden Imam and Mahdi. Sahib al-Zaman translates to the "Master of Time" or the "Guardian of Time"; Imam al-Zaman means the "Imam of Time"; Imam al-Asr is the "Imam of the Age" or the "Imam of the Era"; and Vali al-Asr means the "Sovereign of the Age" or the "Sovereign of the Era." The terms are highly philosophical and eschatological with regards to Islamic notions of time. The titles are commonly expressed in Shi'a Muslim cultures and societies in particular; the longest boulevard in the Middle East, for example, is the Vali-e Asr Street in Tehran which runs the North-South axis of the city.
Hidden and Long-Living Prophets	A contemporary and historical mainstream belief among many Sunni and Shi'a Muslims is the belief in currently alive and long-living Hidden Prophets such as Jesus, Elijah, Khidr, and Idris. The Qur'an also mentions the Prophet Noah to have been on a prophetic mission among his people for 950 years, therefore putting him in the category of long-living prophets. This idea can also be found in other religions, such as the mainstream belief of many Christians in the occultation and long-life of Jesus Christ, who is currently believed to be alive but apparently hidden. There are also parallel beliefs held by many Jews regarding Prophet Elijah – also believed to be currently alive for millenia and hidden in heavenly occultation – and his return as a precursor to the coming of the Messiah.[5]

[5] Joseph Dorman, "Who was Elijah and Why Do Jews Open the Door for Him on Passover?" 30 March 2022 Brandeis University, *The Jewish Experience.*



The Great Mosque of Mahdia, in contemporary Tunisia, was built in the early tenth century CE by order of the first Caliph of the Fatimid Empire, Abdullah ibn Hussain, al-Mahdi bi-llah. The Fatimid Caliph al-Mahdi was a Hidden Imam coming from a line of Ismaili hidden imams (*al-a'imma al-masturin*) prominently situated in the Ismaili tradition.

21 March 2010. Credit: Wikicommons, Citizen59 (CC BY-SA-3.0)

Question 2 |

Do Sunni Muslims Also Believe in the Hidden Imam?

Short Answer:

Some Sunni Muslims do believe in the Hidden Imam who is currently in occultation, but, while much more common historically, this phenomenon is marginal in the contemporary period although it can be found within some Sufi communities. Many prominent Sunni scholars throughout history have believed that the Mahdi is the Hidden Imam in the Twelver Shi'a line. Also, as discussed above, the doctrine of occultation—that a figure is alive yet hidden from public view for a very long period of time—is accepted by mainstream Sunnis today and across history, as exemplified with Sunni views on Prophets Jesus, Khidr (Khizr), and others.

Extended Answer:

The belief in the Hidden Imam is not exclusive to just the Shi'a Islamic tradition. Sunni Muslims can in fact believe in the Hidden Imam, and there is nothing intrinsic in mainstream Sunni doctrines or beliefs to oppose the belief in the Hidden Imam or the idea of occultation. Within the Sunni hadith corpus, including in the canonical six books of hadith, there are numerous traditions about the Mahdi, including traditions that the Mahdi is a descendant of Fatima, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad, and therefore can theoretically correlate with Shi'a beliefs. However, unlike in the case of Twelver Shi'ism, the belief in the Hidden Imam is not a point of doctrine within Sunnism, and there can be a range of opinions held by Sunni scholars regarding the existence and identity of the Hidden Imam.

There are many examples of Sunni Muslim scholars believing that the promised Mahdi is the same Twelfth Imam followed by Twelver Shi'a Muslims. These scholars include the well-known Sunni scholar Sibt ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1256 CE), who recorded narrations that the Twelfth Imam is the Qa'im, the Sahib al-Zaman ("the Master of Time"), and the Mahdi.[6] Many Islamic scholars have also noted that Ibn Arabi (d. 1240 CE) also believed the Mahdi was the Twelfth Imam.[7]

[6] See his T*adhkirat Khawass al-Umma bi-Dhikr Khasa'is al-A'imma* which was written on the virtues of the Twelve Imams; see: Wilferd Madelung, al-Mahdī, Encyclopaedia of Islam II.
[7] Other Sunni scholars who accepted that the Mahdi is the Twelfth Imam include Sadr al-Din Ibrahim

While such beliefs by Sunni Muslims may seem marginal today, this has not always been the case historically. For many centuries following Islam and preceding the height of the Safavid-Ottoman rivalries in the 16th century CE, Muslim sectarian definitions had not been fully codified and there existed a larger state of "confessional ambiguity" where Muslims mixed doctrines of what we today consider to be either Sunni or Shi'a discrete Islamic traditions.[8] Some have utilized the term "Twelver Sunnism" to describe mainstream beliefs found in the Muslim world that simultaneously maintained the primacy of the Twelve Shi'a Imams alongside the legitimacy of the first "Sunni" Caliphs of Islam (Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman) who are considered illegitimate by most Shi'a Muslims.

Moreover, it is important to note that Sunni scholars vary in who they believe is the Mahdi, with many saying they do not know who the exact person will be although he will be a direct descendent of the Prophet. This is the mainstream contemporary position within the Sunni tradition, which believes in the coming of the Mahdi but is ambiguous about who the actual person of the Mahdi is aside from his genealogical inclusion in the House of Muhammad (*Ahl al-Bayt*).

Irrespective of the specific belief in the Hidden Imam, most Sunni and Shi'a Islamic traditions largely agree on the following points on the eschatological Mahdi (based on the six canonical books of Sunni hadith and four canonical books of Shi'a hadith), although there can be slight differences of opinion on the individual positions:

1. The Mahdi will emerge at the End of Time to establish universal justice.
2. The Mahdi is a member of the House of the Prophet Muhammad (*Ahl al-Bayt)*.
3. The Mahdi is specifically from the children of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, and therefore a direct descendent of the Prophet.
4. The person of the Mahdi is different than Prophet Jesus, who is the Messiah.
5. Prophet Jesus will be a follower of the Mahdi and will pray behind him.

al-Hammui (d. 1322) and Sulayman b. Ibrahim al-Kunduzi al-Balkhi (d. 1877) alongside many other well-known Sunni scholars; see: Madelung, *al-Mahdī*.

[8] Payam Mohseni and Mohammad Sagha, "Five Myths of Sectarianism within Islam in the Contemporary Middle East," *Visions: A Leading Source on Global Shi'a Affairs at Harvard Univerity,* 12 April 2022.



The Sirdab of Samarra (or *Sirdab al-Ghayba*) holds immense significance for Shi'as as the underground extension of the residence of the Tenth, Eleventh, and Twelfth Imams in the Twelver Shi'a line. According to some traditions, it is the last place the Twelfth Imam was publicly seen by some select Shi'a community members. The Hidden Imam al-Mahdi in the Twelver line entered occultation in the ninth century CE and is believed to be alive until today.

***March 25, 2022. Credit:** [al-Askarian (CC0 BY-SA-1.0)](#)*

Question 3 |

How is the Imam Different from the Caliphate?

Short Answer:

Unlike many Sunni Muslims, Shi'a Muslims do not seek to restore or construct an Islamic Caliphate. The concept of the Caliphate, however, can largely be understood on two levels: (a) the historical institution of the Caliphate and (b) the ideal religious and political theory regarding the Caliphate. The historical institution of the Caliphate, symbolized by the Umayyads and Abbasids, is largely viewed negatively by Shi'a Muslims as illegitimate. However, the concept of the Caliphate, as a Qur'anic term, is accepted by Shi'as as a divine institution and the deputyship of man on earth, specifically with reference to the succession to the Prophet Muhammad. Moreover, for most Shi'a Muslim denominations, the function of the Caliphate is one aspect of the Imam's authority and derives from his sovereignty, meaning that the Imamate is theologically and doctrinally more elevated and encompassing than the Caliphate. The Shi'a Imams are considered by most Shi'a denominations to be higher in status than all of the previous Prophets, with the exception of Prophet Muhammad, while deeply believing in the role of all the tens of thousands of monotheistic Prophets as divine guides and messengers of God and role models of humanity. The Imam is a Qur'anic term and is considered a status above the status of Prophethood, as alluded to by the Qur'anic narration of Prophet Abraham praying to God to make him an Imam even though he already had the status of a Prophet (Qur'an, 2: 124).

Extended Answer:

The historical institution of the Caliphate has largely been associated with Sunni Islam, and prominent movements headed by Sunni Muslims have advocated for a restoration of the Caliphate in the modern era—whereas today there is no major contemporary Shi'a political project of creating or restoring the Caliphate. As a largely marginalized and repressed denomination of Islam, the Shi'a have come to view the historical imperial Caliphates, such as those of the Umayyads and Abbasids, disdainfully. An exception to this is Ismaili Shi'a views on the Fatimid Caliphate,

which ruled large portions of North Africa and the Levant in the tenth to twelfth centuries CE.

Moreover, the concept of the Caliphate (as a Qur'anic religious concept) is not rejected by Shi'a Islam and is part of a Shi'a religious understanding. Apart from the political sentiment that many Shi'a may hold about the historical practice of the Caliphate, here, we will examine how the concept of the Imamate and the Caliphate are distinct from a Shi'a perspective. While this topic is subject to rich and complex theoretical and doctrinal discussions by scholars and philosophers across history, the Imam (as part of the Islamic principle of Imamate) is largely considered a much more foundational and expansive concept than the Caliphate. The belief in the special role and function of the Imams in Islamic theology as divinely appointed leaders and guides of humanity following Prophet Muhammad is known as the principle of the Imamate, which is one of five main principles of religion (*usul al-din*) according to Twelver Ja'fari, Ismaili, and other of Shi'a denominations.

While there are differences among the various Shi'a denominations on the specific individuals considered to be Imams and the specific attributes and sanctity the Imams may have doctrinally, the Shi'a theological understanding of history is marked by two distinctive periods reflective of what the tradition considers two of the five principles of Islam: the cycle of Prophethood and the cycle of Imamate. Prophethood refers to the messengers of God sent to guide humanity and transmit divine revelation on earth. Islam has many Prophets, largely considered to number 124,000—from Prophet Adam to Prophet Muhammad (inclusive of the Muslim Prophets Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, and Jesus among others who are shared with the Judeo-Christian tradition). As the last Prophet, Muhammad brought an end to the cycle of Prophethood, and with Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, and the first Imam, the cycle of Imamate begins.

To explain this historic shift concisely from a Shi'a perspective: the best and final Prophet (Prophet Muhammad) revealed the best and final book of revelation (the Holy Qur'an). The rest of history is about the actualization of the best book. The Imamate is the best means for the actualization of the best book. The Imams represent the true reflection (as both interpreters and practitioners) of the Qur'an. From this Shi'a perspective, the Imamate is thus of a higher principle in Islamic theology than the concept of the Caliphate. For many scholars, the Imamate is a more comprehensive concept under which the Caliphate is subsumed. In much of the scholarly and general references to these terms, Caliphate etymologically mostly refers to a successor, whereas Imamate does not necessarily have to do with nominal political successorship. In this conceptualization, and even etymologically, Imamate is about leading followers to a future point in time; the Caliphate can be considered to

continue a previous line of authority as successor.

While for Sunni Muslims today the institution of the Caliphate has been lost, the Imamate is still a living and functioning institution for nearly all Shi'a Muslims. This is of significance as political authority across many Shi'a denominations stems from the Imam, which for Twelver Muslims is based on deputyship to the Hidden Imam, whether for the leading clergy (such as the Grand Ayatollahs) or the position of the *vilayat-e faqih* (or the Guardianship of the Jurisprudent) as reflected in the position of the Supreme Leader, which heads the political system in modern Iran. Although not related to a state institution, this is similar to contemporary Musta'li Ismaili theology regarding the Da'i al-Mutlaq, whose authority derives from the Hidden Imam, and also the Ismaili Druze who await the return of their Hidden Imam. For Nizari Ismailis, the Imam is not in concealment and is openly represented in the person of His Highness Aga Khan IV today. Despite these differences, however, all Shi'a traditions share the belief in an end-times Mahdi.



Painting by Iranian Master Mahmoud Farshchian alluding to a ceremony on the Night of Power or Destiny (*Laylat al-Qadr*) undertaken by placing a Qur'an above the head and requesting salvific intercession from the House of Muhammad (*Ahl al-Bayt*) and especially the Hidden Imam. On this night, the Shi'a faithful believe that their destiny for the year ahead is written through the intercession of the Hidden Imam.

2002. Credit: [***Islamoriente, Mahmoud Farshchian (CC0 BY-SA-1.0)***]

Question 4 |

Why is the Hidden Imam Considered the Heart of Islam?

The heart of Islamic political theory revolves around the question of leadership. Who is God's rightful deputy and representative on earth? This is not merely a political question; it is also a deeply religious and cosmological issue. According to mainstream Shi'a beliefs across almost all Shi'a denominations, the entire cosmos and the universe were created for Prophet Muhammad and his Holy Family (*the Ahl al-Bayt*), or the House of Muhammad, as the best means to know, love, and worship God. The Qur'an in action is reflected in the person of the Imam, hence the title of the Imams as the "speaking Qu'ran." According to well known positions and traditions found within Shi'ism, if the Imam did not exist, the entire world and cosmos would thus cease to exist because the Prophet and Imam (*the Ahl al-Bayt)* are the very reason for creation.

The objective of guiding and leading creation (and humanity in particular) to know, love, and worship God is the main function of the Imam. The light of the Imam is present in the heart of every believer; therefore, access to the Imam is also considered, especially from a mystical perspective, as a spiritual inner journey of realizing one's own full human potential and reason for creation. The emphasis that Islam places on seeking knowledge of the self, which results in knowledge of God, is accomplished through the mediation – and hence "gateway" – of the Imam as a perfect manifestation of God's divine qualities and as a personal exemplar of the divine guide to reach one's true spiritual potential and human perfection. The best human manifestations of divine traits such as mercy, justice, wisdom, and love are best manifested today in the person of the Imam.

Additionally, many traditions emphasize that the Imam's return will usher in a new age of science and technology. He represents a rational flourishing of the intellect and learning. The Imam is thus a symbol for the expansion of rational knowledge and understanding of the world. The emphasis on the Imam, moreover, is advocated through sincerely and selflessly submitting to God and serving Him, thereby acquiring His Love—the key to true personal education and true success. The trajectory of history and the story of humanity therefore is to lead to the culmination, confirmation, and manifestation of reaching the Imam as the successful and rational objective at the End of Time. Religion is geared to the just and bright future which will be ushered in by the Imam (the Mahdi) and will be under his domain by divine permission as it is today but without people's recognition—hence why the Imam is

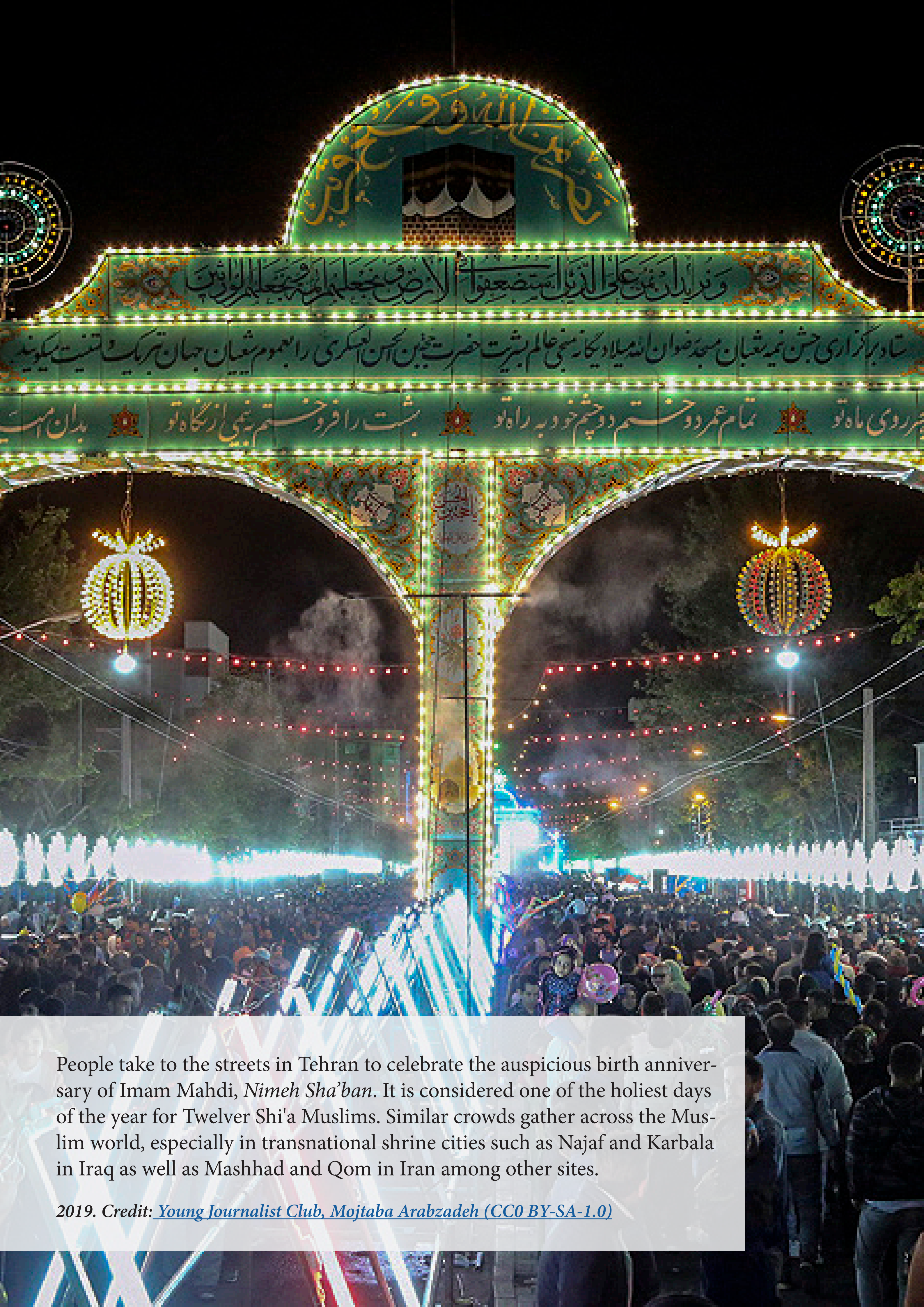
"concealed" and in occultation. Therefore, for most Shi'a denominations, the meaning, function, and final objective of religion pass through the person of the Imam, the gateway of Islam.

Because of the special status that the Imam has for God, believers ask the Imam for intercession, such as accepting them to serve the Imam or forgiving their sins. This is a position also found in the mainstream Sunni hadith canon regarding the salvific intercession of the Prophet Muhammad on the Day of Judgement.[9] Particularly within Shi'a thought, it is believed that the key to salvation is through the Imam's contentment with the believer, which is then a reflection and indicator of God's contentment. According to many traditions within the Shi'a hadith canon, previous Prophets, such as Prophets Adam, Noah, Joseph, and Jesus, knew of the Imams (and the House of Muhammad, the *Ahl al-Bayt*), prayed for them to God, and asked them for intercession to attain salvation.[10]

While for the majority of Shi'a traditions the current Imam is hidden today, this is not the case for all Shi'a communities. For Zaydi Muslims, the Zaydi Imamate came to an end in the mid-20th century after more than a millennium of rule in Yemen, and there is no Zaydi Imam publicly declared in present circumstances. In the Nizari Ismaili tradition, on the other hand, the Imam is publicly accessible and recognized as the current Aga Khan. However, it is important to note that although the Nizari Imam is present today, the concept of Hidden Imams forms a core part of Nizari Ismaili heritage and beliefs related to previous generations of Ismaili Imams.

[9] See the tradition regarding Prophet Muhammad from the famous companion Anas ibn Malik found in *Jami' al-Tirmidhi*, one of the six canonical books of Sunni hadith: "'I asked the Prophet (s.a.w) to intercede for me on the Day of Judgement. He said: 'I am the one to do so…'"

[10] See: Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Ashura in Twelver Shi'ism*, (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978), esp. 23-68.



People take to the streets in Tehran to celebrate the auspicious birth anniversary of Imam Mahdi, *Nimeh Sha'ban*. It is considered one of the holiest days of the year for Twelver Shi'a Muslims. Similar crowds gather across the Muslim world, especially in transnational shrine cities such as Najaf and Karbala in Iraq as well as Mashhad and Qom in Iran among other sites.

***2019. Credit:** [Young Journalist Club, Mojtaba Arabzadeh (CC0 BY-SA-1.0)]*

Question 5 |

How Does the Belief in the Hidden Imam Impact Muslim Social and Political Affairs?

Short Answer:[11]

Just because the Imam is hidden does not mean he is not relevant for Muslim societies and communities today—or that the belief in the occultation of the Imam is a doctrinal footnote without major socio-political significance. For many Muslims in the United States, belief in the Hidden Imam rests at the heart of their lived experiences and helps inform their understanding of their identities and engagement within larger American civil life. Shi'a-Americans are increasing their presence as involved members of American multicultural society in places like Dearborn, Michigan, where they constitute a majority of the population and are proving to be key voters in this swing state including in the last presidential elections, as well as in Texas, California, Florida, Washington D.C., and the Tri-State Area where sizable communities exist.[12] The centrality of the Hidden Imam within Shi'a Islam therefore extends into Shi'a-American life in their construction of and participation in centers, mosques, social organizations, charities, and educational institutions, whether religious or civic.

Indeed, there is a Grand Ayatollah in the United States, based in Michigan, who claims deputyship on behalf of the Hidden Imam. In addition to Shi'a denominations that believe in a hidden imam, the Nizari Ismaili community believes in a present Imam, the Aga Khan, and has a rich and vibrant civic community in the United States. The community is also currently undertaking construction of a significant center in Texas, and the Aga Khan Foundation acts as an important patron of the sciences and arts, including at Harvard University and MIT. A plethora of other Shi'a communities

[11] Portions of the answer to this question are taken directly from the article by Mohammad Sagha, Al-Ghadir: The Fountainhead of Shi'ism, *Visions: A Leading Source on Global Shi'a Affairs at Harvard University*, 20 August 2019) with permission by the author and the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs at Harvard University.

[12] Mehdi Haider, "Shi'a Muslim-Americans Were a Key Force in Joe Biden's Victory," *Visions: A Leading Source on Global Shi'a Affairs at Harvard University*, 14 December 2020.

across various denominations are also active across American society, including Musta'li Ismaili, Alevi, Zaydi, and Bektashi Muslims, among others.

The significance of the doctrine of the Hidden Imam has manifested itself in various ways across history and held important socio-political consequences, especially in places such as the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, ranging from authority in the Fatimid Empire in the Eastern Mediterranean to the development of Twelver Shi'a clerical institutions in Iran and Iraq. In the modern period, one explicit example can be found in the current Iranian Constitution that explicitly recognizes the sovereignty of the Hidden Twelfth Imam and describes itself as a placeholder state awaiting the emergence of the Imam to whom it will relinquish authority. The recognition of the Hidden Imam, indeed, was even part of Persia's first 1906 Constitution, more than seven decades prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Similarly, the emergence of the institution of the Source of Emulation (*Marja al-Taqlid*), represented in the institution of the Grand Ayatollah today, to which the faithful of the Twelver Ja'fari school are committed to following, was directly based on deputyship to the Hidden Imam. Despite some differences in method and strategy throughout time and between individuals, Grand Ayatollahs in Twelver Shi'ism, such as Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Iraq, have collected religious taxes, raised armies, and undertaken political activity and issued political rulings—functions that belong to the Hidden Imam—all as part of their deputyship to the Mahdi. The post-revolutionary Iranian political system is explicitly based on the Guardianship of the Jurisprudent (*vilayat-e faqih*) derived from theories on the authority of the clergy during the Absence of the Imam. The broad interpretation of this theory, which has been placed in practice in Iran, grants extensive formal powers to the institution of the Supreme Leader under deputyship to the Hidden Imam.

Representative authority on behalf of the Hidden Imam is also found in other Shi'a denominations. The religious leader of the Musta'li Ismailis, the Da'i al-Mutlaq, rules on behalf of the Hidden Imam present in the Musta'li Ismaili tradition (i.e., a figure different from the Twelver Hidden Imam) who is also currently believed to be in occultation. The Da'i al-Mutlaq, who administers a vast financial and social network of followers, accordingly has a theoretically parallel position to the Twelver Ja'fari theory of *vilayat-e faqih*. Therefore, the idea of the Hidden Imam is important not just doctrinally but also practically and politically for global geopolitics, state formation, and daily life for millions of Muslims around the world today.

The belief in occultation and the Hidden Imam also underscores the view that the world prior to the advent of the Imam is filled with injustice, oppression, and corruption. It thus encourages hope in the future and perseverance in just and righteous deeds in the face of hardships, oppression, and socio-political ills. It

likewise can be predisposed to normalizing a critical attitude to status-quo conditions, producing a lack of contentment with contemporaneous modes of power dynamics, governance, and thought systems. This aspect of messianic belief has, in large part, informed Shi'a revivalist thought in Iranian, Iraqi, and Lebanese discourse, among others, that contributed to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. However, this is not to claim that Shi'a thought has always historically been revolutionary or to discount the various and multifaceted factors and conditions that produced the Islamic Revolution in Iran, for example, but rather to highlight important cultural and psychological factors that Shi'a thought has abetted, an important subject of discussion in the academic literature.

In terms of political and military significance, much has been written on the Ashura paradigm and the importance of the events of Karbala for Shi'a Muslims. While the martyrdom of Imam Hussain in Karbala looms large in the moral and political consciousness of Shi'a Muslims, the deeply important impact of the future coming of the Mahdi and his redemptive salvation remains largely understudied and unknown. From the very earliest historical mentions of the Mahdi in Islamic history until today, the Mahdi has often been intimately linked with vengeance for Imam Hussain. Through avenging the blood of Imam Hussain, the Mahdi completes the uncompleted mission of the martyred Imam. The event at Karbala therefore is not a finished event in the past but rather a still unfolding present and future whose conclusion has not yet been written. The Hidden Imam, therefore, is the key that ties the past with the present efforts of many Shi'a believers—including within political organizations—towards a promised just future. Various forms of this belief can also be analyzed across Shi'a militaries, paramilitaries, and political organizations, either historically or in the contemporary period, which have been imbued with this culture of avenging injustices against the Imams and supporting the Mahdi in opposition to perceived falsehood and darkness.

Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Mirza Mohammad Hasan Shirazi (d.1895), one of the leading Muslim scholars of his time, heads a mass congregational prayer. He issued a famous *fatwa* or religious edict—on behalf of the Hidden Twelfth Imam—during the Persian Tobacco revolt of 1891-2. The *fatwa* was issued in the city of Samarra (modern-day Iraq), which was under Ottoman rule at the time. Shirazi in effect declared that the Shah was waging war against the Hidden Imam and, with unprecedented mass poplular pressure, compelled the Qajar Shah of Persia (Iran) to rescind the lucrative tobacco monopoly the autocrat had given to the British. Historically significant, Samarra is where the Hidden Imam was last reported to have been seen prior to the Major Occultation.

4 February 2020. Credit: The Islamic Republic News Agency, Mahdi Ahmad (CC0 BY-SA-1.0)



Extended Answer:

The divine function of the Imam (as described in the explanation to question 4 above) is known as *walaya* (or alternatively, *wilaya*). This *walaya* is at the core of the human creation story and purpose of life: to know, worship, and love the Creator as both the Source and Return of the human spirit. The foundation of political thought and authority in Shi'a Islam rests on this key pillar, which roughly translates as "vicegerency" or "sovereignty." This notion runs through more than a millennium of Shi'a theory and belief, starting with the succession to the Prophet Muhammad himself. Mainstream Shi'a doctrinal beliefs recognize Prophets and Imams as possessors of *walaya* (Persian: *vilayat*) and as sovereign representatives of God. Therefore, vicegerency and deputyship reflect the larger worldview of man's place in the universe with respect to God and the trust God placed in man to govern the earth with just stewardship.

This understanding produces the unique status and authority of *leadership* in Shi'a thought as a deeply informative confessional, social, and political institution. It was over the dispute of leadership following the death of the Prophet Muhammad that the formal Shi'a movement began. Etymologically, Shi'a means "follower" or "partisan" as used in the Qur'an, in which the term in some instances refers to the partisans of divine Prophets. It is through this sense that the term "Shi'a" came to be utilized as a shorthand for "*Shi'at Ali*," referring to the followers of Imam Ali.

The importance of the issue of leadership as a cornerstone for Shi'a thought, institutions, and politics continues to drive much of the concerns and debates throughout history as well as within the contemporary Shi'a world. For example, the early Ismaili Fatimid Caliph-Imams, starting in the 10th century, laid claim to an encompassing *walaya* as vicegerents of God on earth in administering the political system, economy, and other aspects of the vast Fatimid Empire. In the Twelver Shi'a tradition, early theorists such as Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 1022 CE) and Shaykh al-Tusi (d. 1067 CE) argued for jurists to exercise sovereignty on behalf of the Hidden Imam over social, financial, and political affairs. Later Twelver jurists also exercised practical aspects of political and financial sovereignty, such as Muhaqiq Karaki (d. 1534 CE) in Safavid Persia and Shaykh Ja'far Kashif al-Ghita (d. 1813 CE) in Iraq, among others. However, not all Twelver Shi'a clergy and thinkers have ascribed to this broader reading of deputized authority and political action; others throughout time have practiced or written about a more minimal assumption of socio-political responsibilities before the advent of the Twelfth Imam, although this position has been more marginal in the modern period.

An important chapter in the anti-colonial history of the Middle East was

based on the political activism of the leading clergy and marked by the mass popular support for the 1891 Persian Tobacco Revolt against European monopoly of the lucrative and strategic industry of Persian tobacco granted by the Qajar Shah of the time to the British. The revolt culminated in a fatwa issued by one of the leading Grand Ayatollahs, Sayyid Mirza Mohammad Hasan Shirazi, whose *fatwa* proclaimed: "from this day forward, the use of tobacco for water pipes and pipe tobacco, in whatever form it may be, is tantamount to warfare against the Imam of the Age [the Twelfth Imam], may God hasten his reappearance."[13] As a representative of the Hidden Imam, the Grand Ayatollah stated that disobedience to this *fatwa* was a war on the Hidden Imam himself. The boycott was practically universal and immediately implemented, including by members of the Shah's inner family, and led to the withdrawal of the concession by the Qajars.

Similar anti-colonial movements spearheaded by the Grand Ayatollahs were also seen in important massive armed uprisings against the British occupation of Iraq in the 1914 and 1920 Iraqi revolutions. Both of these revolutions were led by Twelver Grand Ayatollahs issuing fatwas to mobilize against the British occupation, including by Ayatollah Sayyid Mohammad Kazem Yazdi in 1914 and Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Shirazi in 1920. The Persian Constitutional Revolution of 1906 also witnessed heavy popular mobilization due to the direct support of the Grand Ayatollahs not only in Iran but also in Iraq, although there were important clergymen who also viewed aspects of constitutionalism critically but nonetheless were politically engaged in opposing the movement. These understandings therefore also undermine the misleading characterization of Shi'ism and clerical politics within a quietest-activist binary framework.

In the contemporary period, beyond the example of Iran and the Islamic Revolution as commonly discussed in the academic literature, the Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani administers a vast network of social institutions and intervenes in crucial moments in the Iraqi political process. In 2014, he issued a *fatwa* that raised an army to fight ISIS, as part of his representative authority of the Twelfth Imam, and he also played a key role in the drafting and ratification in the post-2003 Iraqi constitution. The authority of the Grand Ayatollahs to collect taxes, lead Friday Prayers, and to mobilize people to fight in the defense of the community stems from this authority: *wilaya* and deputyship. This is because these functions, such as the authority to lead Friday Prayers or collect religious taxes, rests solely with the Hidden Imam. For anyone else to be able to have authority in these tasks would thus require a status of deputyship to the Hidden Imam in order to perform the Imam's functions

[13] Hamid Algar, "Hasan Širāzi," *Encyclopaedia Iranica,* 15 December 2003.

that otherwise would be rendered either obsolete and ignored or be considered as usurpation of power if enacted without deputyship.

Socially and culturally, there are various commemorations and religious rituals associated with belief in the Hidden Imam. Important transnational holidays take place across the Shi'a world and in the West, particularly for Twelver Shi'as, marking the birthday of the Hidden Imam during the middle of the Islamic month of Sha'ban (*Nimeh Sha'ban* or *Nisf Sha'ban*). Millions of adherents commemorate this event across the globe, and large crowds gather at the Jamkaran Mosque on the outskirts of Qom, Iran, which is reported to have been constructed on the orders of the Hidden Imam. Similarly, massive crowds gather in Samarra, Iraq at the home of the father of the Mahdi, the Eleventh Imam in the Twelver line, Hasan al-'Askari, which was the last place the Hidden Imam was seen before entering occultation according to several hadith traditions. Many practices of charity, communal aid, and social service are carried out by Muslims as gifts for the Hidden Imam. The implications of this belief across various socio-cultural, political, military, and economic domains require much further research and are generally understudied.

While different readings exist, for many Shi'a societies across time, the martyrdom of Imam Hussain was not just a grievance or past injustice to be sorrowful over but rather a calling to action in the present to prepare for the coming of the Mahdi and the restoration of justice on earth. Throughout Islamic history, accordingly, with respect to political and military affairs, the promise of the manifestation of the Mahdi has produced movements seeking to avenge Imam Hussain's martyrdom. This ranged from Mukhtar al-Thaqafi, who rebelled against the Umayyads in 685 CE a few short years after the killing of Hussain establishing a short-lived state and notably killing many of the murderers of the third Imam, to the Abbasid and Fatimid revolutions that led to the establishment of large global Islamic empires (in the 8th and 10th centuries respectively) and harbored Hidden Imams and Mahdis for avenging the blood of Imam Hussain.

The political theology of building a state for the Hidden Mahdi could also be seen with the Sarbadar state in 14th century Iran, established in the name of the Twelver Hidden Imam, as well as in Safavid Persia in the 16th century whose ideology was similarly built on a Twelver Mahdist state. The latter case included Qizilbash Alevi Shi'a Muslims of Turkic background spread across Persia and eastern Anatolia (present day Iran and Turkey respectively) who believed in eschatological charisma of the Safavid Order on behalf of the Hidden Imam. All of these ideological political movements were rooted in the belief in the Mahdi and avenging Imam Hussain. It is important to also note—and is relatively unknown—that the Ottoman Empire's famous Janissary Corps (which in Persian, *Jan Nesar*, means "souls ready for

sacrifice"), was also heavily influenced if not dominated by the Bektashi Shi'a Order despite the formal Ottoman commitment to Sunni Islam, a topic which represents an important area of further research. This calling can also be seen in contemporary times in a large range of Shi'a-led militaries, paramilitaries, state formations, and political organizations, many of which have proven to be disruptive to the modern state-building project in the Middle East as well as becoming important actors in the geopolitical challenges in the region, a subject area that is outside of the scope of this report.

Within the broader spectrum of Shi'a thought, there are debates over the station of the Imam, his cosmological versus mundane composition, and the nature of legitimate political or social representation on behalf of the Hidden Imam following his Major Occultation. While the positions of Shi'a elites and scholars over time have varied with regards to these questions, what is noteworthy is the centrality of these debates around the notion of *walaya* within Shi'a political thought and the degrees, if any, of the assumption of *walaya* and deputyship (*niyaba*) on behalf of the Hidden Imam. There is, therefore, diversity in the application and understanding of such deputyship, which applies to all Twelver Ja'fari Grand Ayatollahs.

For both Nizari and Musta'li Ismaili Shi'a Muslims, as well as the Druze, the concept of hidden Imams was a key cornerstone of their historical development. Before the establishment of the Fatimid Caliphate which was ruled by an openly identifiable Ismaili Imam, the secret missionary organization of the Ismaili Imams claimed to represent a line of Hidden Imams (*al-a'imma al-masturin*). Current members of the Musta'li branch of Ismaili Muslims hold that their Imam–from the Fatimid Ismaili branch–is currently in occultation. As a consequence, the Da'i al-Mutlaq runs the affairs of the community as the representative of the Hidden Imam. The more numerically predominant Nizari Ismaili branch led by the Aga Khan possesses an openly accessible Imam at this time. Additionally, the Druze (also called *al-Muslimun al-Muwwahidun*, or the Unitarian Muslims), believe their Imam, the Fatimid Caliph-Imam al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, is the long-living "Awaited Imam,"[14] who went into occultation in the early eleventh century CE.[15] While the concept of the Hidden Imam usually is linked to "long-life" occultation, it is not necessarily exclusively so. The label of Hidden Imams can also include those Imams with secret or hidden identities to avoid persecution, such as for example has been common across several Shi'a denominations such as the Zaydi and Ismaili traditions.

[14] Hussam S. Timani, "The Druze," in Muhammad Afzal Upal and Carole M. Cusack (Eds.), *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 725.
[15] Timani, "The Druze," 727.



Masjid al-Moazzam, located in Surat, India, is a major center for the Musta'li Shi'a Ismaili community (also known as Bohra Ismailis). The Hidden Imam in this tradition from the Fatimid Ismaili line, al-Tayyib, went into occultation in the twelfth century CE, and a line of Hidden Imams continues until today.

27 December 2014. Credit: Wikicommons, Mortaza.aliakbar (CC BY-SA-4.0)

Conclusion

Despite the importance of the concept of the Hidden Imam, the subject has largely been understudied or misunderstood in both academic and mainstream coverage in the West. However, as we have emphasized throughout this report, the Hidden Imam is of paramount significance both doctrinally and practically among Muslim societies across time. While the Hidden Imam is particularly emphasized among Twelver Shi'as today, it is by no means restricted to just the Twelver Shi'a denomination. Many other Muslim communities and scholars have ascribed to the belief in the Hidden Imam historically and in contemporary times, including among Musta'li and Nizari Ismailis, the Druze, as well as among Sunni Muslims. Just as importantly, the idea of occultation, or concealment, of a living Prophet or Imam, is a much more universalized concept accepted by mainstream Sunni Muslims and also beyond Islam as well. Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Zoroastrian beliefs, among others, all emphasize the promised End Times Savior, and most of these traditions also emphasize hidden and long-lived eschatological figures.

The belief in a Hidden Imam is much more than just a point of technical doctrine—it is at the very heart of Islam for millions of Muslims around the world. Shi'a Muslims believe they are the lost followers and "orphans" of the ever-present Imam.[16] Therefore, while general references within the religion are to the "Hidden Imam," it is in fact the believers themselves who are philosophically considered to be hidden from the Imam: the Imam is present and accessible, but believers have not yet fully opened their hearts to him. The people, in other words, are the ones who have concealed and veiled themselves from him, an idea that takes a special role in mystical Shi'a philosophy and the concept of Divine Presence and its manifestation in the science of presence *(ilm-e huzoori)* and the philosophy of presence (*falsafe-ye huzoor)*. The Hidden Imam, moreover, is the Sovereign to whom the trajectory of history and human societies are inevitably moving towards. He represents not only the promise of a just society but also a key cosmological reason for creation and the human condition.

The concept of occultation and the Hidden Imam is also significant practically for global geopolitics and social order across the Muslim World. Historically, the Fatimid Empire was founded on the belief of the return of a Hidden Imam and Mahdi for Ismaili Shi'as.[17] In more contemporary times among the Twelver Ja'fari Shi'as, the political system in Iran is based on the model of the Guardianship of the Jurist (*vilayat-e faqih)* whose authority stems from representative deputyship on behalf of the Hidden Imam and is enshrined as such in the Iranian constitution. In Iraq and other states in the region as well, the Twelver Grand Ayatollahs run socio-political and financial affairs for millions of citizens on the basis of their deputyship

[16] Muhammad Baqir Majlesi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Wafa', 1983) 2: 2.
[17] Heinz Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi: The Rise of the Fatimids* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

on behalf of the Hidden Imam—as does the Da'i al-Mutlaq for Ismaili Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. Many other similar cases abound in contemporary and historical times as well. As this report further emphasizes, it is important to appreciate the pluralism and diversity within Islam. Doing so highlights the richness and dynamism within the religion and the multitude of ways Muslims have interpreted and applied their beliefs throughout history. The belief in the Hidden Imam has impacted and shaped the politics, society, and culture of countless individuals across time. Understanding the multilayered and deep impact and importance of the Hidden Imam is a crucial step in gaining a fuller understanding of Islamic thought and socio-political organization—and indeed can reflect many foundational comparative insights into other religions and societies across the world. While the Hidden Imam may seem today to be situated at the margins of the study of religion and politics, this report underlines the importance of the Hidden Imam—as well as promised Hidden Saviors—across diverse religious traditions, world empires, and the lived practices of diverse communities across the globe.



The shrine complex of Prophet Job is a notable center of the Druze community located in Lebanon. As a transnational community primarily spread across several states in the Levant, the Druze are a branch of Ismaili Shi'a who believe that the Hidden Imam within their tradition is the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah who went into occultation in the eleventh century CE and is believed to be alive until today.

24 March 2022. Credit: Wikicommons, Mar Sharb (CC BY-AG-2.0)

Further Reading

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